

# The professional advancement of recreation therapy through groupwork and service-learning

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**Abstract:** Career training and education for active citizenship involving students in service to the greater community need not be viewed as distinct and juxtaposed pedagogies. Through systematic curriculum development, that includes groupwork fundamentals, experiential-learning activities, and service-learning experiences, these two educational approaches can be quite complementary and provide students with a deeper understanding of practice-based knowledge, as well as skills and knowledge to effectively respond to broader based contextual factors. Recreation therapy students at the University of Southern Maine, with background in these knowledge areas, were not only able to become effective practitioners but also obtained a broader worldview, and increased their willingness to actively engage with their professional organization and the clientele served, thus impacting both the profession and their communities.

**Keywords:** Groupwork, Experiential-learning, Service-learning, Recreation Therapy, Professional Advancement.

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## **Introduction**

Boyer (1999) argued that higher education should move beyond merely educating students for careers and instead prepare them for life-long citizenship through service to the greater community. Career training and educating for life-long citizenship mutually reinforce each other and can be amalgamated to prepare future practitioners who are steeped both in active community service and professional practice. Community service, broadly defined, incorporates service to helping professions and the clientele served. Boyer (1994) emphasized engaged learning by which ‘professors need to apply real-life problems’ and ‘build partnerships with practitioners’. Boyer’s recommendations serve as a contextual framework for the following article detailing groupwork and service-learning projects that both prepared recreation therapists for professional practice and also provided an invaluable service for the advancement of recreation therapists and the field of recreation therapy.

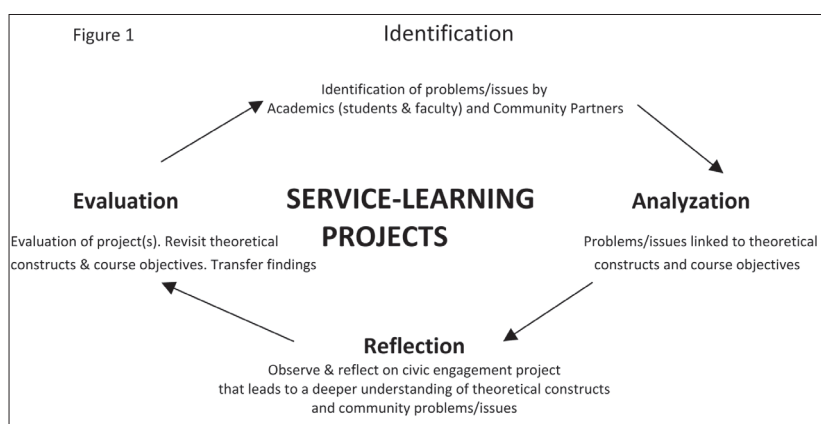
## **Service-learning**

Service-learning is

a teaching and service strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teaching civic responsibility and strengthening communities. (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, 2009)

It involves more than a volunteer experience assigned by an instructor as one component of a course. While important, course assigned volunteer experiences, many times, are not closely linked to theoretical constructs and course objectives, which is the major component of service-learning. Faculty employing service-learning pedagogy must not only link service-learning experiences to theoretical course objectives but must emphasize these linkages during classroom presentations. A service-learning pedagogical approach contains opportunities for students to observe and reflect on their civic engagement project and its relationship to theoretical constructs and course objectives: examples include journaling; class discussions, whether in-class or online;

presentations, that may include community partners. Finally, service-learning may include an evaluation component in which everyone involved have opportunities to assess the success of the project. Faculty, during this component, should also reinforce findings and how these relate to theoretical constructs, course objectives and students' future endeavors, whether academic or in professional work. Specifically, the service-learning process entails problem/issue identification, student reflections (related to project, theoretical constructs, and learning outcomes) and evaluation (see Figure 1).



Faculty can greatly increase the effectiveness of service-learning as a pedagogical approach by incorporating it throughout the curriculum that prepares future professionals. In lower-level preparatory courses faculty can introduce the concept of service-learning through faculty-directed projects aligned with courses objectives within a professional degree program. Building on this foundation, students can then engage in independent, self-directed service-learning experiences in upper-level capstone courses. While self-directed, faculty still need to structure the experience that allows for identification, analysis, reflection and evaluation (See Figure 1).

## Groupwork

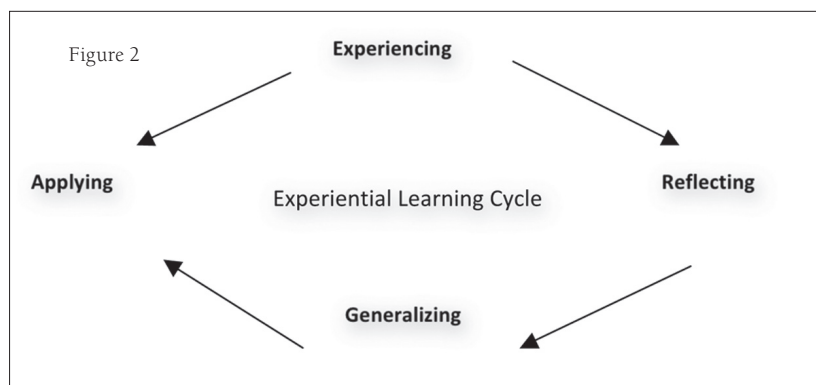
It is not unusual for faculty to assign students to group projects without any preparation, assuming that students will learn about groupwork

just by struggling through the challenges, a 'sink or swim' pedagogical approach. There is not always a recognition that an understanding of effective groupwork requires more than didactic learning related to groups. It includes understanding group dynamics, type of groups, group roles, decision-making in groups and stages of group development.

Similar to progressive curriculum development, efficacious groupwork and service-learning experiences require the successful integration of foundational knowledge, skills and abilities in order to effectively move to more advanced tasks. Students will greatly benefit from faculty-directed learning experiences eventually leading to self-directed learning, rather than engaging in groupwork and service-learning with little or no preparation. Faculty should first begin by presenting concepts related to groupwork, including information focused on functional group theory, group dynamics, leadership, group roles and group communications, among other related topics. It is helpful for students to be provided with opportunities to experience themselves in task group process work within the safe and supportive confines of the classroom. In this context they can apply theory to practice around leadership, group composition, dealing with difference and difficult members before actually beginning their projects and working in groups.

Students, in order to comprehend groups and groupwork, need to fully experience what it means to be group members in a safe and trusting environment. This allows them to reflect on the group process and the part they played. One such method to build trust and establish comfort is through in-class experiential learning activities, which include experience, observation, reflection, and application (Figure 2).

Course materials and experiential exercises should prepare students for their work within groups, with major emphasis placed on group dynamics, group leadership, group roles and group communication. Preparing for groupwork should focus on how group dynamics go far beyond the interactions that take place among individuals within a group setting to also include how these interactions are influenced by outside forces in the physical, social and cultural environment (Edginton, Hudson, & Scholl, 2005). Faculty can enhance the learning and the outcome by providing students with ample opportunities to practice group leadership, group roles and group communication. Augmenting lectures related to these topics, experiential activities,



followed by faculty-led discussions, permit students to assess their abilities and skills and then take corrective action. These experiences may also help to increase students' level of self-confidence as group members and group leaders.

## Recreation therapy/therapeutic recreation

Students enrolled in *Recreation Leadership and Management and Professional Development in Therapeutic Recreation* are pursuing a professional career in recreation therapy. Recreation therapy, also referred to as therapeutic recreation, 'is a treatment service designed to restore, remediate, and rehabilitate a person's level of functioning and independence in life activities, to promote health and wellness as well as reduce or eliminate the activity limitations and restrictions to participate in life situations caused by illness or disabling conditions' (Scott, 2011).

Recreation therapy services are delivered by qualified professionals with training and education in recreation therapy/therapeutic recreation service delivery and professionally certified by the National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification (NCTRC). The professional certification designation is Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS). The credential requires a bachelor's degree or higher from an accredited institution of higher education in the area of recreation therapy or therapeutic recreation, an approved internship under supervision of a professionally credentialed CTRS, and the passing of a national certification examination. Recreation therapists deliver services

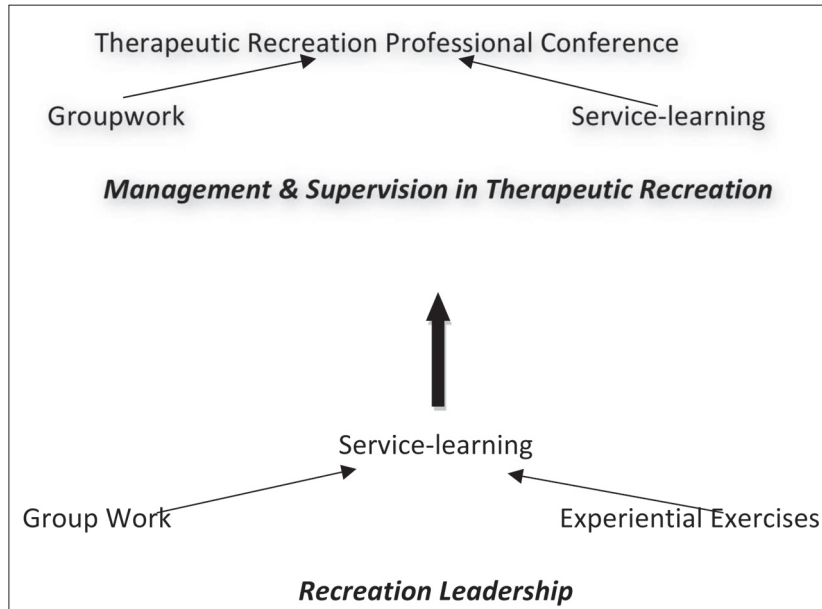
in rehabilitation hospitals, rehabilitation units of general hospitals, long-term care, sub acute care, or skilled nursing facilities, substance abuse rehabilitation facilities, home health services and residential facilities for person with disabilities.

## **Building a foundation for groupwork and service-learning**

Prior to enrolling in their internship and senior capstone course, *Management and Professional Development in Therapeutic Recreation*, recreation therapy students must successfully complete *Recreation Leadership*. This course provides the necessary foundation for their internship, their senior capstone course, as well as their future professional practice as recreation therapists, where they will be required to work closely with clients, other therapists, and agency administrators. Rather than viewed as separate courses with distinct objectives, courses are designed to build on prior learning of course work related to groupwork and service-learning from other courses (See Figure 3)

One major objective of *Recreation Leadership* is to educate students about groups, groupwork and group leadership. Topics covered include, but are not limited to group dynamics, types of groups (task/work groups and growth groups), group roles (task roles, personal/social roles, and dysfunctional/individualistic roles), level of work groups (independent and interdependent), and stages of group development (forming, storming, norming and transforming). Students, as future recreation therapists and community recreation leaders, must not only understand the concepts related to groups and group dynamics, but must be able to apply them because groups are a fundamental element within any recreation therapy or recreation and leisure service agency. Program delivery systems within recreation therapy and community recreation agencies have group-oriented activities and services at their very core. During the course students will be working with groups in various stages of development within their service-learning experience. In order to be most effective in leading groups students benefit from a basic understanding of group development and characteristics and needs of each stage.

Figure 3



Closely aligned to the didactics, instructional objectives include numerous experiential activities reinforcing topics covered. An example of an in-class experiential activity related to groupwork is a 'Tower Building Exercise' (Johnson & Johnson, p. 38). This exercise requires groups of 4 to 6 students, competing against each other to build the tallest, strongest, most attractive and most creative tower using just cardboard boxes, construction paper, markers and magazines. Group members work under a time constraint of one hour to complete their tower. As groups construct their towers, two students per group observe and record the group's work. The observers' assignment is to assess their group using a task/maintenance observation sheet and answer general questions related to how group members organize work and participate in the tower-building task. At the completion of the exercise, observers share their observations with group members. A summative discussion assesses the activity and its relationship to groups' knowledge and skills. Throughout the semester the students participate in numerous other experiential exercises related to group leadership and groupwork. They

receive information and training in techniques that leaders can employ when working in groups, including how to structure and lead group discussions, brainstorming, experiential exercises, and committee meetings.

*Recreation Leadership* students complete a service-learning project with a Portland, Maine elementary school or the *Before and After School Program* administered by the Portland, Maine Recreation Department. This experience directly addresses two course objectives: apply various leadership methods and procedures in a cross-section of settings with diverse groups, and lead diverse groups in various therapeutic recreation and leisure settings. Within the classroom students learn and then lead fellow classmates through various play and recreation activities and games with time set aside for assessment and fine tuning of their presentation. Students then choose a service-learning site where their assignment is to assist teachers or recreation leaders in leading groups of young children in play and recreation activities. In keeping with the service-learning philosophy the following were included as part of this assignment: assisting with the leadership of children in various group activities, classroom discussions related to students' experiences, and keeping a journal in which students reflect on their experiences and how they were affected. A major part of classroom discussions focused on group behavior, roles and stages of development.

Another major course objective for *Recreation Leadership* centers on how to plan, implement and evaluate fund-raising activities and special events. Putting course content into action, students engage in a service-learning project that reinforces course content. In one case, after identifying various fund-raising projects, the students chose to collaborate in fund-raising activities with the International Childhood Enrichment Program. The International Enrichment Program (ICEP) is a non-profit organization that seeks to build playgrounds in Afghanistan and Haiti. Through fund-raising activities and donations ICEP employs Afghan and Haitian laborers to build playgrounds at a low cost in their home countries.

In the aforementioned project students divided into specific work groups: operations, finances, marketing/publicity, and programming work groups. One member from each committee was then chosen to serve on the steering work group to coordinate the overall project. Rather than merely being assigned to each respective work group, the



students received grounding through the semester on what Fernandez (1997) identified as 'The Five Cs' of effective task groups; control (or leadership), conflict, communication, consensus and cohesion (p. 1). Each topic was addressed throughout the semester in both didactic presentations and experiential activities. During the fund-raising projects students were continually reminded of the importance of each one of these components in running effective task/work groups. Throughout the semester, class discussions also occurred related to well-functioning task/work groups and how they differed from other groups. Many of the experiential activities employed to enhance students' understanding of 'The Five Cs' include team building activities such as the *3 D Obstacle Course*, *Traffic Jam*, *Winter Survival of Lost at Sea Exercise*, and *Balloon Frantic*. An extremely important part of these activities is the processing/debriefing that occurs at the completion of each activity. Processing/debriefing allows students to make connections to not only the 'The Five Cs' but to their service-learning project.

In addition to bake/food sales and bottle drives, *Recreation Leadership* students staged swing-a-thon fund-raising projects with children from Portland, Maine, *Before and After School Programs*. Working closely with Program Directors at each of the eight sites, *Recreation Leadership* students coordinated the activities at each site. The Marketing Committee created promotional materials that were distributed by *Recreation Leadership* students working in small groups, to each site. These students then followed up with a presentation to the children at each site about the 'Swing-a-thon' and how the money raised would be used to build playgrounds for impoverished and traumatized children in Afghanistan and Haiti. Next, students oversaw the swinging and subsequent fundraising at each *Before and After School Program* site. Finally, the Financial Committee took responsibility for the collection and distribution of funds to the *International Childhood Enrichment Program*. As a fundraising incentive each site competed against the others, with the site raising the most money receiving a pizza party and prize for the site. The Operation Committee coordinated this event. The students then completed a written evaluation and participated in an in-class discussion to assess the 'Swing-a-thons'.

## **Bringing it All Together - Community Service: Working with the professional community**

Recreation therapy students at the University of Southern Maine must complete a senior capstone course, *Management and Professional Development in Therapeutic Recreation* during the spring semester following their fall semester internship. Major revisions were made to this course for the 2009 Spring Semester that included a service-learning project encompassing the planning and implementation of a professional conference. This senior capstone project provided students with a valuable opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills to stage a professional conference while also assisting them in their transition from students to professionals in recreation therapy.

One of the first assignments in *Management and Professional Development in Therapeutic Recreation* that students complete is an in-class discussion and assessment of their internship from the preceding semester. As the students focused their attention on their interactions with other professional groups, such as occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech therapists, students shared their concerns about perceived professional status. This resulted in discussions related to prescribed services, third-party payers, and credentialing, which eventually led to the question of why recreation therapists in Maine have not pursued licensure. Based on this interest, the twelve students unanimously decided that recreation therapy licensure would be the focus of their major semester assignment, which was to plan and implement a professional recreation therapy conference. The project was assigned by the professor but, the responsibility to identify a conference theme, session topics and presenters was left to the students, thus giving them ownership and strengthening their commitment to accomplish this task. More than merely a contrived experiential learning activity, this community service project stemmed from an actual problem that would be addressed by students together with members of a professional community, and was tied to the theoretical constructs covered in *Management and Professional Development in Therapeutic Recreation*; thus embracing all aspects of service-learning pedagogy. The importance of the project was best summarized by a student's conference evaluation, 'We were basically trying to do something that has not been investigated/done in Maine' (2010 Therapeutic Recreation

Conference Summative Evaluation). Another student added that the 2011 conference 'was important for the profession' (2011 Therapeutic Recreation Conference Summative Evaluation).

By taking part in this service-learning project, the students develop the skills and abilities to plan, implement, and evaluate a major professional event while providing an invaluable service to recreation therapists in Maine and New England. In addition, both students and professionals gain a deeper understanding of the licensure process. Once the students decided on a conference theme, they formed smaller work units consisting of two to three students in each group. These groups included a program, operation, financial, and marketing committee, with one representative of each group serving on the steering committee to coordinate the overall planning of the conference.

The initial conference in 2009 was a huge success. More than fifty recreation therapy specialists from Maine and New England attended *Looking Toward the Future: Recreation Therapy – Moving Toward Licensure in Maine and New England*. This conference focused on the professional licensing of recreation therapy specialists in Maine and New England and featured speakers from New Hampshire, which recently granted licensure to recreation therapy professionals. One conference attendee noted that 'the event was as well-organized and delivered as many professional conferences as I had attended on my career' and that 'the students should be very proud of their efforts.' Other attendees concurred with this conference evaluation.

In 2010 the *Management and Professional Development in Therapeutic Recreation's* students chose to highlight innovative recreation therapy programs as the conference focus. The conference, titled *Programming for Success: Maine Has A Lot to Offer*, was also very successful with over fifty attendees. The focus of the 2011 conference, *Evidence-based Practice: It's Time*, showcased recreation therapy interventions that were grounded in evidence-based research. The conference was a great success with over sixty professionals and students from Maine and New England attending the full-day conference. Conference evaluations were extremely positive, mirroring the following:

*I think that this was an excellent conference and valuable for my clinical knowledge.*

*I think it's wonderful that it was organized by the students of therapeutic recreation.*

*Encouraging! Needed this reminder; importance of Evidence-based Practice!!*

*Very effective. I love hearing from speakers who are passionate about their endeavors that help to advance our profession.*

As is exemplified from the above comments, the conference attendees greatly appreciated the opportunity to participate in this continuing education experience, the only recreation therapy conference in Maine. Conference presenters shared that they valued the conference as a mechanism to share with other professionals and students the evidence-based interventions that they are implementing with their clients.

For the past three years, recreation therapy students at the University of Southern Maine successfully met the course requirements of planning and implementing professional recreation therapy conferences. As is often the case with service-learning projects, numerous other benefits occurred for both students and professionals. Students experienced the challenges and benefits inherent in teamwork. Attendees benefited from having local and affordable conferences that offered continuing education units. Attendees profited from in-depth presentations related to licensure, efficacious interventions, and evidence-based practice. Equally important, the conferences provided the framework for operationalizing the foundational steps necessary for recreation therapy licensure, and advancement of the profession in Maine. Finally, an extremely valuable but unplanned reward from the students' involvement was their transformation from student to professional status. By the conclusion of each conference the students' identity had shifted from university student to a self-assured professional. This transformation was not only recognized by the students but by all those in attendance.

At the completion of each conference *Management and Professional Development in Therapeutic Recreation* students evaluate the conference and their efforts. Overall, the students' evaluations of individual group members, including their own efforts, are forthright and frank. Qualitative evaluations provide valuable information for future conference planning. The conference debrief sessions, which include questions regarding all phases of the conference both positive and negative, permit students to reflect together about their efforts. Students provide written responses to the following: *How did your work on the*

*conference address course objects and build on your education and training as a therapeutic recreation student?* Responses to this are best exemplified by the following:

*The conference was an excellent opportunity for students to gain the skills to plan, implement and evaluate a professional conference.*

*This was an excellent opportunity to apply concepts and theory that we covered over our past years at the University of Southern Maine.*

Lastly one student summed it up with, *having the opportunity to put on this professional conference was a major step toward our professional status as recreation therapists* (2011 Therapeutic Recreation Conference Summative Evaluation).

## **Conclusion**

Groupwork, service-learning, and professional development are not distinct and juxtaposed pedagogical approaches. They can be combined to provide students with both a deeper and broader educational experience. Barcelona and Bocarro (2004) surveyed both recreation and parks practitioners and faculty related to collaborative endeavors that promoted the advancement of the field. The service-learning projects undertaken by the recreation therapy students at USM accomplished many goals viewed as important by the survey respondents, most notably, 'Interact with practitioner/faculty at conferences and professional workshops' (Ranked 2); 'Provide opportunities for students to engage in service-learning as a component of an academic course' (Ranked 3); and 'Offer/take advantage of continuing education opportunities through college/and universities' (Ranked 6), (Barcelona and Bocarro (2004), p. 14.)

The service-learning experiences cited focused on providing service and staging professional recreation therapy conferences which permitted students to collaborate with practitioners and faculty. These experiences furnished students and practitioners opportunities to acquire knowledge related to relevant professional topics: licensure, efficacious interventions and evidence-based practice. These service-

learning experiences helped propel recreation therapy students' development into committed and engaged professionals. Through their capstone service-learning experiences recreation therapy students at the University of Southern Maine gained far more than mere professional training.

Their education and training has gone far beyond producing well-functioning practitioners to creating professional engaged in their larger professional and social communities.

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